

Problem-Based Learning at the Basic Law Enforcement Academy – Adult Learning in Action

What is “Adult Learning”? How is it different from “regular learning”? In this article we’ll examine how adult learning principles will be more prevalent in the Problem-Based Learning curriculum at the BLEA. With PBL as the overall program approach, there will be lots of opportunities to use various engaging methods of delivering instruction. Let’s identify some key facts about adult learners:

1. *Adults are self-directed.* They will retain and apply information much more fully when they take an active role in the learning. This means having control over what they learn and how they learn it.
2. *Adults will discard information and skills that they feel are not relevant to them.* If an adult learner doesn’t understand the need to acquire a new skill, the effort will not be expended. A strong point of a PBL curriculum is that learners get to see the relevance up front – the complex problems precede the acquisition of skills and information.
3. *Adults have a wealth of experience to draw from.* Police recruits come to the BLEA with skills and knowledge that helps shape how they relate to the information they encounter here. Adults need to see the connection between the new information and what they already know.
4. *Adults demand respect.* Adults perform much better when their ideas and opinions are valued and they can be part of the learning team, instead of merely the lowly receiver of information. Even though academy recruits are new to police work, they are quality people that have worked hard to earn a spot in our profession.
5. *Adults learn in different ways.* Not every person processes information in the same manner. Some learners benefit from observing, while others must put hands on before it makes sense. Some people have a knack for numbers, while others are more creative and musical. The theory of Multiple Intelligences developed by Dr. Howard Gardner gives insight into how a curriculum can stimulate all students.

As you can see, a rigid military-style classroom setting, where students are not allowed to move or speak freely, flies in the face of the fundamental principles of adult learning. The science clearly shows that students benefit from a more open and engaging learning environment. Even more important, our goal is to empower students to solve problems on their own. We want them to have the skills to find their own answers. We want self-directed learning to be their habit. (See the July 2008 issue of *The Dispatcher* for our article on academy discipline standards and how we’re continuing to train new recruits in the discipline, professionalism, and traditions of police work.)

If we expect all this from new officers on patrol, then our curriculum should encourage them to practice it throughout the academy. If we simply were to lecture for 19 weeks straight, then we shouldn’t be surprised when a new officer turns to the FTO/PTO and says, “Tell me what do.” Instead, we want new officers to systematically work through problems on their own, asking for assistance when appropriate.

Our instructors will use an assortment of facilitation methods in the classroom and in live training:

- Guided discussion (Socratic Questioning)
- Visual aids (whiteboard, easels, video, high-resolution projection, Judicious use of PowerPoint, etc.)
- Hands-on practice
- Lecture (in limited amounts; usually no more than 30 minutes at a time)
- Brainstorming
- Research and Reading
- Group projects and presentations
- Journaling and writing assignments
- Mock scenes
- Role play

For example, the Police Traffic Collision Report (PTCR) was formally taught to recruits over the course of several hours, where every single box on the forms was explained via lecture and PowerPoint. Recruits endured these long hours and then at the conclusion, they individually completed a PTCR based on a scenario.

Within the new PBL curriculum, recruits will be given the blank forms, the same scenario, and the instruction book produced by the state. In their group, they will work together to complete the PTCR. Recruits will make use of available resources to complete the task at hand. They will learn from each other and even rely on previous experience to solve the problem. Of course the instructor will be facilitating this group work and also be a valuable resource when students get stuck and need a nudge in the right direction.

This is just one small example of how we are taking the BLEA curriculum and making it more realistic and engaging. Through recognition of established adult learning principles, and the careful planning of lessons, academy recruits will be afforded the maximum opportunity to learn the basics of police work.

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